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CHARLES DE GAULLE AND THE BREAK WITH ATLANTICISM

CORE COURSE ESSAY

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France was a nation struggling in the late 1950's. The economy was stagnant and the military weakened by its missions in Vietnam and Algeria. The fragmentation of political parties precluded any hope for consensus in domestic or international affairs. In 1958 Charles de Gaulle was elected president. The Fifth Republic was formed, along with a new constitution which replaced a parliamentary form of government with one that granted greater powers to the executive branch. Charles de Gaulle wasted little time before announcing his focus on international affairs.

De Gaulle was disturbed by the decline of French stature in the world. He believed that France had the universal mission to use its power for the benefit of others. France's mission (grand design) was to be one of peace and to lead Europe as a "balancing third force" in a world suffering under the hegemony of the two superpowers - the United States and the Soviet Union.¹

If de Gaulle was to restore France as the leader in Europe and a major power in the world, he could not cede power to anyone. One of his core principles was to "sustain the will and ability to make independent judgements" in all spheres of activity - military, political, economic and social.² These principles conflicted with France's situation in 1958, a subordinate in the American-dominated North Atlantic Treaty Organization and integrated into the European Common Market. The purpose of this paper to analyze the effectiveness of Charles de Gaulle's statecraft in his attempt to break the Atlantic Alliance and create a powerful, French-led Europe.

Charles de Gaulle was a French hero who had enjoyed an illustrious military career. A protege of General Petain, he succeeded in a variety of key staff and command positions, to include serving as a division commander at the outbreak of World War II. By war's end he led the French forces to victory, solidifying his national stature.

Following the war, de Gaulle served as president of his country's first two provisional governments, but resigned in 1946 out of dissatisfaction with the weak coalition government. Only the revolt in Algeria and the fear of civil war brought him back to lead his country.

De Gaulle envisioned himself as the embodiment of France, the conscience of his country. He firmly believed France was destined to return to its former grace and stature, writing in his memoirs "All my life I have thought of France in a certain way...like the princess in a fairy tale...the positive side of my mind assures me that France is not really herself unless she is in the front rank".³

Despite such idealistic thoughts, de Gaulle was a traditionalist who believed that nation states should be the primary actors in any organization, rather than subordinated to an integrated entity, such as NATO. The President was very concerned about the balance of power in the world, as evidenced by his desire to unify Germany - but under European control. He feared that the current bipolar system precluded peace in the world.⁴

President de Gaulle believed that the Cold War would not last for long. He was not afraid of the Soviets and did not consider them a threat to Europe. To de Gaulle, the USSR's interests were limited to control of its satellite countries and containment of China.

The primary threat to France was the United States. De Gaulle described the US as having the "elementary conviction that it had the right to predominance in the world".⁵ Distrustful of a nation that entered both world wars late and snubbed him during the Yalta Conference, de Gaulle did not trust, or want to rely on, the immediate assistance of the United States. Further, he feared that Europe could become the battlefield in a nuclear war as a result of an escalating conflict between the US and USSR.

According to de Gaulle, all of France's national interests would be enhanced if France became Europe's leader. The first priority, however, was to ensure national survival. De Gaulle felt it vitally important to organize a confederation of nations in Europe with France as its leader.⁶ To do so meant to weaken the Anglo-American hold on the continent.

Defense of one's country, according to de Gaulle, was the first duty of the state. If a nation could not defend itself, then it would lose its authority. In fact, a strong defense could minimize the potential costs of dependence across a spectrum of issues.⁷

The French economy was weak, but starting to improve. Given its substantial population, abundant resources and strategic location, France had the potential for economic growth and to serve as a center of influence. De Gaulle began a program of decolonization in Africa, which lessened the fiscal and military drain. Although the President did not focus on the economy to the same level as defense, he did initiate contact with African and Southeast Asia countries, which enhanced trade assisted in projecting French values abroad.

De Gaulle was convinced the French public would support his foreign policy as long as he first settled the Algeria situation and then worked on economic growth. His views were supported by the elite who had brought him to power. Further, he believed that success in foreign affairs would improve the nation's low self esteem, which itself was a threat.⁸

De Gaulle held that alliances had to serve France first. If they did not serve France, they were to be amended or abandoned. The United States controlled NATO, therefore it controlled foreign policy. The Treaties of Rome established the Common Market, stipulating that it was a first step to a political community in which European nations could merge their national

sovereignty (an anathema to de Gaulle). His plan of action was to force French leadership in both NATO and the Common Market.

In 1958, France attempted to make the Atlantic Alliance a three power oligarchy (France, United States, Britain) which shared in the political and military strategy, to include the use of nuclear weapons. In place of an integrated military organization with an American Supreme Commander, De Gaulle wanted a European confederation composed of a combined general staff subordinate to a committee of heads of state. He also wanted NATO to expand from a regional alliance to one which provided a mutual guarantee of defense around the world (to protect France's African interests).⁹ Most of the member countries disagreed with the proposal and President Eisenhower sent de Gaulle a letter flatly rejecting it.

Unsuccessful, de Gaulle began his retreat to a nationally oriented and autonomous defense system. In 1959 he withdrew the French forces he needed from NATO to deal with Algeria. The French Mediterranean Fleet was also withdrawn from the Alliance. Later, France banned the introduction of American atomic bombs into the country, and also took control of its own air defense system.

At the same time, de Gaulle formally announced the gradual breakaway from NATO and announced the intention to develop nuclear weapons. He believed that if France had nuclear weapons then it could defend the security of Europe if the stalemate between the US and Russia dissolved. Additionally, he would be able to persuade Europe to trust France rather than America, and be free of American dominance.

On February 13, 1960, the first French atomic bomb was tested. It was at this point, according to de Gaulle, that France had recovered its independence and possessed the military power necessary to assume leadership

of Europe. France would remain under the American nuclear umbrella, for the time being, until nuclear weapons and a means of delivery were fully developed.

The next step for de Gaulle was to wean Europe politically and economically from "Anglo-American influence" in the Common Market. In 1960 France proposed that a confederation of nation states replace the Council of Ministers, who voted by majority rule. Additionally, France wanted to block Britain's entry into the market, a country whose real allegiance was to the United States. Again, the intent was for France to lead the Common Market. De Gaulle personally tried to rally support for his proposals. Although the member countries were willing to make some changes, de Gaulle refused to accept any compromise. The French proposals were therefore defeated in 1962, with the provision that the Common Market members did not want to further any political organization which did not include Britain.¹⁰

In 1963 de Gaulle made another attempt to both keep Britain out and foster France's position, this time trying to gain Germany's support. The two leaders signed a Franco-German Friendship Treaty, which de Gaulle believed would be the foundation for the rebuilding of Europe. The government of Germany, however, was not ready to place their future in de Gaulle's hands and rejected the treaty.¹¹

De Gaulle's failure was now complete. The Common Market did not want France as a balancing "third force", which its members believed would increase rather than decrease the risk of annihilation. The member countries also feared that elevating France would be approving a return to dangerous nationalism, which had always created problems for Europe.

France continued its gradual withdrawal from NATO, while reforming and modernizing its military forces. In 1964 the first Mirage IV atomic bomber was

produced, followed later by nuclear powered submarines and intercontinental ballistic missiles. As the forces evolved, France's participation in NATO decreased. French forces returning from Algeria were kept under French control. In 1965 the French Atlantic Fleet was withdrawn from NATO, followed a year later by the entire military structure. In 1968 France declared its neutrality, free from all political and military entanglements.¹²

As France gradually withdrew from NATO, de Gaulle increased his personal diplomacy throughout the world, attempting to strengthen his position in Europe while weakening American influence. Although his independent stance did increase the stature of France in some Third World countries, de Gaulle's unwillingness to provide foreign aid or investment inhibited any strong attraction to France.

Several crises occurred throughout de Gaulle's presidency which illustrate his inability to influence the escalating confrontation between the US and USSR. In 1960 de Gaulle worked hard to bring together the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union to a Four Power Summit in Paris. His agenda was to include discussions on the unification of Germany, nuclear disarmament, and assistance to the Third World. Unfortunately the U2 downing incident in May resulted in a confrontation between President Eisenhower and Premier Khrushchev. Unsuccessful in getting the two leaders to reach a compromise, President de Gaulle cancelled the summit.¹³

In August 1961 the Soviet Union erected the Berlin Wall, which forever ended any hopes that de Gaulle had for a reunification of Germany under European control. Finally, the focal event indicating de Gaulle's incorrect assumptions concerning the Soviet Union took place in 1968. The USSR's takeover of Czechoslovakia, along with threats toward Romania and Yugoslavia, proved that France's celebration of detente was premature and that French

resources and capabilities were not enough to be recognized the arbiter between the Soviets and the United States.¹⁴

President de Gaulle left the Presidency without achieving his strategic objective a of French-led Europe, primarily for three reasons. First, while possession of nuclear weapons allowed him to stray from NATO, it was not enough for the world to bestow upon France the recognition as a world leader. The sentiment and condition of the European countries would not support such a shift in allegiance. Most had still not fully recovered, militarily or economically, from the war and were willing to remain under NATO and American leadership for the short term. Further, many Europeans began to think de Gaulle was more concerned about France's power than truly attempting to unify the European community.¹⁵

Secondly, de Gaulle's style of leadership and diplomacy alienated most leaders. Instead of being a world leader, he was the scourge of diplomacy. Always confrontational, the French leader did not believe in compromise, bargaining or cooperation. He had no credibility with the superpowers. When dealing with the Soviet Union who desired trade with the French, de Gaulle declared that he already had trading partners. Later, Russia was upset with de Gaulle over the Franco-German Treaty, which was contrary to the original aim of destroying German militarism.¹⁶

De Gaulle's relationship with the United States was even more unyielding. As mentioned earlier, de Gaulle did not support Eisenhower with NATO. When Kennedy came into office, de Gaulle declined to support him on issues relating to Laos and the Belgian Congo. Later, he severely criticized American involvement in Viet Nam. It is difficult to imagine that he really expected to share power with the US and USSR when he had nothing to offer other than his intransigence.

De Gaulle's influence with the Third World was just as limited. While he was willing to take on trade and cultural exchange programs, he would not discuss defensive alliances outside Europe. Finally, he opposed the United Nations, and refused to support most of its peacekeeping efforts. A feared man, he had virtually no following outside his own country.¹⁷

The third, and primary reason for de Gaulle's failure to achieve world power status for France was his neglect of domestic economic and social issues, culminating in 1968. Students upset with crowded conditions on college campuses started to demonstrate. In addition, while the economy initially flourished during de Gaulle's tenure, France was not growing as rapidly as Germany, and was falling behind in terms of investment. The value of the franc fell, but de Gaulle refused to make adjustments to strengthen it. Labor unrest with the government bureaucracy grew into riots. By the time de Gaulle switched his focus to domestic issues, France was in a state of anarchy, which eventually led to his defeat.¹⁸

De Gaulle's attempt to break with Atlanticism did have some positive results. First, France returned to the world map. While it was not a superpower, it became the world's fourth largest economy, and its modernized military and nuclear capability allowed it some level of protection from the two superpowers. Second, de Gaulle was eventually successful in blocking Britain's entry into the European Common Market (until 1974), which served to reduce any further Anglo-American intrusion into the continent. Finally, France set the example for the Third World countries by its emphasis on sovereignty, which encouraged several nations' demands for greater independence. This situation served to lessen the consensus given to the superpowers. In the long run de Gaulle was correct about the eventual collapse

decline of NATO, but it was Germany rather than France which became the central leader of Europe.

Effective statecraft requires the implementation of all of a nation's resources to influence other nations. France relied on its nuclear capability and intransigent diplomacy to achieve its objectives. The country started from a weak position in comparison to the two superpowers - both economically and militarily. Later, since no one believed France would ever initiate a war with nuclear weapons, there was little else to fear or respect about the country.

De Gaulle's antagonistic style of diplomacy stymied any chance for France to influence other nations. As K.J. Holsti writes, effective diplomacy requires the desire to want to reach an agreement, the capacity to deliver on threats or rewards, and the credibility of the state.¹⁹ De Gaulle had none of these traits. He was simply endured.

Charles De Gaulle was a realist who failed to temper his policies to an interdependent world. It is unlikely that given the strength of the United States and the Soviet Union in the late 1950's, there is anything he could have done to increase France's position in Europe. Certainly by the late 1960's, most Frenchmen realized they were as dependent upon the political and economic forces of the world as the rest of Western Europe.

ENDNOTES

1. Michael M. Harrison, "Gaullist Perspectives on French Security," The Reluctant Ally: France and Atlantic Security (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1981) 53.

2. Harrison 50.

3. Adrian Crawley, De Gaulle: A Biography (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) 409.

4. Charles De Gaulle, Memoires of Hope and Renewal (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971) 201.

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8. Harrison 54.

9. Harrison 60-61.

10. Crawley 415-417.

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12. Crawley 430-431.

13. De Gaulle 247-252.

14. Harrison 70.

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16. Crawley 423.

17. Crawley 432.

18. Crawley 448-472.

19. K.J. Holsti, International Politics: A Framework for Analysis (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Simon & Schuster, 1992) 143-153.

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